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‘Leader, You First’: The Everyday Production of Hierarchical Space in a Chinese Bureaucracy

Abstract

Recent studies highlight how organizational power relations are embodied within space. However, relatively little is known about these spatialized power relations are reproduced on a day-to-day basis. Drawing on a ten-month ethnographic study on a large government office in China, we finds that hierarchical space was produced through three intertwined processes. It was *proliferated* as employees actively sought out signs of hierarchy in the organization’s space; it was *familiarized* as employees fabricated and circulated fanciful narratives about their spatial environs, and it was *ritualized* as employees acted out hierarchical relations both within the organization as well as beyond its walls. This results in the hardening of hierarchical relations of power. These findings extend existing literature by showing how hierarchical organizational space is not just something imposed on employees. It is also something employees impose upon themselves.

Keywords: bureaucratic hierarchy, organizational space, everyday lives, Lefebvre, China.

Introduction

Researchers have long recognized that the physical space affects organizational processes such as motivation, productivity and knowledge sharing. But it is only within recent years that a body of research has emerged that systematically study the impact of space on organizational processes (Taylor and Spicer, 2007). One of the central findings in this stream of research is that architecture, room decor and office layout materialize organizational power relations (Dale and Burrell, 2008; Kornberger and Clegg, 2004; Hernes, 2004). For instance, the layout of institutions like prisons bolsters the power of guards and reduces those of prisoners (Foucault, 1997). Similarly, large offices with impressive views tend to reinforce the power of managers within an organization (Baldry, 1999).

Recent research suggests that design is not determinate. A particular form of architecture does not map onto a particular set of power relations in a neat one-to-one fashion. This is because organizational space is constantly produced through the everyday ways it is used and lived within (Beyes and Steyaert, 2012; Wapshott and Marlett, 2012). The ways of occupying space, experiencing it and using it can reconfigure spatial power relations in often surprising ways which were not intended by the designers (Halford, 2004; Hurdley, 2010; Tyler and Cohen, 2010). Much of this literature focuses on the ways quotidian actions can under-mine or resist dominant power relations. However, we know less about how these day-to-day spatial practices can actually bolster and reinforce dominant power relations in an organization. To address this paucity, we ask how social space is produced in everyday organizational lives and this can reproduce dominant power relations.

Drawing on a ten-month ethnographic study in a Chinese government organization that we call ‘the Bureau’, we trace out the everyday production of hierarchical space. We find three intertwined processes: Bureaucratic hierarchy was *proliferated* when employees sought out signs of hierarchy in multiple aspects of the Bureau’s space; it was *familiarized* when employees circulated fanciful narratives about the hierarchical nature of the space; it was also *ritualized* when employees acted out hierarchy within as well as outside the organization. In these episodes of the Bureau’s everyday lives, we found that employees cynically questioned hierarchy. But at the same time they constructed a physical lifeworld of all-encompassing hierarchy.

To make this argument, we proceed as follows. We begin by examining existing studies on organizational space. Following Henri Lefebvre’s (1991) theory of social space, we identify as a research gap the lack of theorizing on the processes of everyday spatial production. Next, we outline the methods used to undertake this study. This is followed by our findings which are presented as three processes of the production of hierarchical space. We discuss how these processes enable us to better understand the everyday production of social space in organizations. We conclude the article by drawing out its contributions, limitations and lessons for future research.

Literature review

Conceptualizing organizational space

Although researchers have established space as an important dimension of organizations,

there are different ways to conceptualize space. One useful framework sees the literature as underpinned by three concepts of space (Taylor and Spicer, 2007). The first of these conceptualizes space as distance; it is founded on the Euclidian understanding of space as the physical distance between two or more points. Following this approach, studies of organizational space largely involve mapping out distance and proximity in an organization. Such data might be aggregated into diagrams or maps which are then utilized to examine the behavioural and ergonomic implications of organizational space (Elsbach and Pratt, 2007; Hall and Hall, 1975; Wineman, 1982), for instance, how seating arrangements, physical barriers and the locations of office facilities encourage certain patterns of behaviours and social interactions in organizations (Allen, 1977; Arge and De Paoli, 2000; Becker, 1981; Bitner, 1992; Brookes and Kaplan, 1972; Duffy, 1997; Hatch, 1987; Grajewski, 1993; Parsons, 1972; Sundstrom and Sundstrom, 1986).

Accounts of space as distance reveal how spatial materiality can have profound effects on a range of organizational processes. However, a strict focus on distance is largely inadequate to explain why and how organizational members interpret their spatial environs (Canter, 1983; Hatch, 1990). This paucity has given rise to a second approach that examines organizational space as lived experiences. This approach is based on the phenomenological proposition that space must be animated with subjective meanings before it can be said to have any behavioural implication (Bachelard, 1958; Casey, 1998; Tuan, 1977). From this perspective corporate architecture, office layout and displayed artefacts express symbolic meanings (Gagliardi, 1990), impart aesthetic experiences (Linstead and Hopfl, 2000) and embody managerial narratives (Yanow, 1998). Importantly, research suggests that users' subjective experiences of space, whether symbolic or aesthetic, can be very different from the ways space is intended in design. Users approach space through their life histories, cultural heritages, social classes, and professional and gender backgrounds; thus, organizational space remains open to multiple interpretations and experiences (Cairns et al., 2003; Daskalaki et al., 2008; Dober and Strannegård, 2004; Ford and Harding, 2004; Halford, 2004; Kociatkiewicz and Kostera, 1999; Rusted, 1990; Yanow, 1995, 1998). Monologues (Van Marrewijk, 2010), visual images (Warren, 2008) and circulated stories (Halford and Leonard, 2006) are important means through which users explore and express their spatial experiences.

Studying space as lived experiences provides some vital insights. It reminds us that users play active roles in producing spatial meanings; furthermore, such meanings are often so varied that patterned out distance cannot be said to have general behavioural implications. However, as organizations are increasingly seen as political arenas (Alvesson and Willmott, 1992; Brown, 2007; Clegg, 1989; Clegg et al., 2006), there is a need to ask how spatial behaviours and experiences are implicated in the reproduction of power relations in organizations. The third approach addresses this and examines organizational space as the materialization of power relations (Dale, 2005). This approach draws inspiration from classic works on sociology and human geography that reveal how domestic, urban and work space (Bourdieu, 1973; Foucault, 1977; Harvey, 1973; Lefebvre, 1991) are 'medium through which social relations are produced and reproduced' (Gregory and Urry, 1985:3). Following this approach, architectural space (Dovey, 1999; Kersten and Giaraldi, 2003), workplace layout (Sewell and Wilkinson, 1992) and office environs (Baldry, 1999) are presented as central in establishing and maintaining power relations in organizations. It is this third 'social' approach that we would like to build on. To do this, we first look deeper at the roots of this approach which can be found in the work of Henri Lefebvre.

Organizational space and power relations

Perhaps the most important statement of how power relations are embodied in space can be found in the French thinker Henri Lefebvre's book *The Production of Space* (1991). It has been a major inspiration for studies of organizational space (Beyes and Steyeart, 2012; Beyes and Michels, 2012; Dale, 2005; Dale and Burrell, 2008; Ford and Harding, 2004; Hernes, 2004; Peltonen, 2011; Spicer, 2006; Taylor and Spicer, 2007; Wapshott and Mallett, 2012; Wasserman and Frenkel, 2011; Watkins, 2005; Zhang et al., 2008). Lefebvre's spatial thinking hinges on a crucial move 'from *things in space* to the actual *production of space*' (1991: 37; original emphasis). He proposed a heuristic triad to capture how space is intimately linked with power relations. Space is at once *conceived* by planners who order space in mathematical ways and by so doing dominate societies with the ideology of scientific thinking; it is *lived* by space users who seek to 'change and appropriate' the imposed conceived space with 'clandestine or underground' experiences, often through artistic imaginations; it is also *practiced* by both planners and users in their respective daily routines which maintain and consolidate space's social 'competence and performance'. Social space is thus a contested terrain constantly formed and reformed as social actors negotiate power relations. Lefebvre believed that such (re)formation of power relations could be explored by mapping the 'interrelations' and 'links' among the conceived, lived and practiced moments of spatial production in a given context (1991: 116).

Lefebvre highlights that social space embodies and dissimulates power relations. But he also recognized that social space cannot consolidate power relations without being torn open, at the same time, in renewed processes of spatial production. For him, social space is essentially an unfinished and unfinishable project. Central to Lefebvre's spatial thinking, then, is the notion that our understandings of space as a power entity cannot be separated from our understandings of space as something that is contested. Throughout his career, Lefebvre searched for that 'irreducible remainder' that redeems space from being a mere power-ossifying object (Zhang and Beyes, 2012). For instance, he was fascinated by the mysteries of everyday lives that generate alternatives out of the quotidian (2008); he also emphasized the body (1991) and life rhythms (2004) as capable of creating novel spaces that sidestep relations of domination.

Building on Lefebvre, Dale and Burrell examine how office buildings are produced by socio-cultural forces in which organizations are situated, and in turn how they come to produce power relations in organizational lives (2008: 43). The authors outline three dynamics through which this works (2008: 48-53). These dynamics broadly mirror Lefebvre's analytical triad. Firstly, space *emplaces*: it fixes 'certain places for certain activities and certain people'. For instance, office layout categorizes employees into social groups such as the boss and the secretary (Martin, 2003); it also facilitates managerial surveillance over the work process (Baldry, 1999). In hospitals, the ways that inpatients are accommodated in wards reflect what is socially defined as abnormal (Prior, 1995). In schools, teachers and students are given different territories to materialize culturally sanctioned forms of civility (Muetzelfeldt, 2006). Secondly, space *enchants*; it 'link together meanings and matter... to produce various power effects'. Government organizations seek to overthrow stereotyped images of bureaucracy by dwelling in modest-looking, medium-height buildings (Beer, 2007). Often, organizational space solicits experiences that reinforce dominant power relations at work, for instance those of hierarchy (Rosen et al., 1990) and gender (Hancock and Tyler, 2007). Experiences such as vigorousness (Hancock, 2006), serenity (Carter and Jackson, 2000; Martin, 2002), career progression (Berg and Kreiner, 1990) and emotional

detachment (Witkin, 1990) can also be designed into space. Thirdly, space also *enacts*; it prescribes certain patterns of mobility in the workplace. It is common that organizations use open-office designs to bring down communication barriers (Edenius and Yakhlef, 2007). Kornberger and Clegg (2004) suggest that some space such as vaguely defined boundaries and empty halls is generative of new power relations in organizations because it lacks prescriptive enactments.

Dale and Burrell provide a useful framework for understanding how organizational space produces power relations and how it is itself produced by macro socio-cultural forces. They note that everyday lives are neither determined by, nor spontaneous in resisting, the kind of power relations laid out in architectural designs. However, they offer no further explanation how this might be the case. This is an important omission as recent theoretical and empirical work suggests that micro activities and everyday life is a crucial mechanisms through which social space and the power relations which they embody are remade. In theoretical work, Wapshott and Marlett (2012) outline how members create spatial configurations, but also appropriate laid-out space by using and experiencing it outside its 'normal meanings or functions' (2012: 68-72). In a more radical move, Beyes and Steyaert (2012) highlight how 'molecular' forms of social space – bodily movements, successions of action, space users' affects – as central to the 'generative and overflowing movements that produce [social] space' in organizations (2012: 46-51).

Empirical work has also echoed the importance of quotidian day-to-day activities in the reproduction of social space and power relations. For instance, junior clerks typically approach organizations as here-and-now places, they perceive space differently from managers who typically adopt a god's view on space (Ford and Harding, 2004). Medical staff in UK hospitals drew on a series of local stories to make their workspace meaningful. They resisted managerially imposed changes through some of these stories (Halford and Leonard, 2006). Female university clerks carefully manipulated their movements, postures and comportments in order to make their gender-neutral office space in a more clearly gendered one (Tyler and Cohen, 2010). Another study finds how the power relations embodied in university buildings which laid out to specify professor-student hierarchy was 'made partial, ambiguous and contingent by the walking bodies of students' (Hurdley, 2010: 59). To contest managerially introduced 'hot-desking' strategies, employees restored workplace communities by sticking to their habitual desks and putting passwords on adjacent computer stations (Halford, 2004; Warren, 2005). Sometimes, designed spatial features were altered so radically in everyday uses that they left visible traces of power confrontation (Wasserman and Frenkel 2011). And Zhang et al. (2008) speculate that the development of resistance in organizations is accompanied by the expansion of resisters' space. Each of these studies highlight how new forms of social space have been constructed in everyday lives.

This emerging strand of research makes an important contribution by highlighting the role of micro-actions in the reconstruction of power relations. However, in doing so tends to see these day to day behavior as largely being the seat of micro-resistance. That is, quotidian actions are seen as way which employees who find themselves in otherwise dominating organizational spaces try to carve out a space of freedom and autonomy for themselves. For instance, hot desking workers stuck to a single desk (Warren, 2005), women re-gendered otherwise masculine environments (Cohen and Taylor, 2010), and medical staff used stories to give local meaning to space (Halford and Leonard, 2006). What all these studies assume is that everyday acts of reworking space can be seen as a subtle form of resistance which undermines or otherwise sidesteps the dominant relations of power embodied within the

space. But what if we were to problematize this assumption (Alvesson and Sandberg, 2011) and ask how the various micro-activities can reproduce and support relations of power in organizations? Could the everyday actions of employees in organizations actually support and bolster the relations of domination encoded into the architecture of the organization? And how might this happen?

To explore this question we draw from an ethnographic study in a Chinese government office. While much has been revealed about the economic (Mann, 1987), political (Ma, 1990) and social (Björkman and Kock, 1995) features of Chinese bureaucracy, relative little is known about the everyday lives within, perhaps because Chinese bureaus are hard to access. We hope that our excursion into the organization is interesting as well as spatially informing.

Methodology

From September 2005 to July 2006, the first author conducted an ethnographic study in the headquarter office (the 'Bureau') of a large tax authority in a coastal metropolis in eastern China. The study focused on the Bureau's new office space: a twenty-eight storey building that was put into use in 2002. The building is an appropriate site for our study. It is designed and constructed *ab origine* and thus facilitates observations on the emergence of social space. Also, the Bureau presents an extreme case of hierarchical power and thus facilitates theory buildings on social space (Eisenhardt, 1989).

The researcher was a fulltime employee at the Bureau from 2000 to 2003. Through the courtesy of his former colleagues, he was granted an otherwise rare research access to the organization. While conducting the field work, the researcher was assigned to a temporary job in his former work unit. Acting as a project liaison, he had the opportunity to contact and visit many other units at the Bureau, including directors' offices. The researcher spent at least three work days every week at the Bureau. Using 'active participation' (Adler and Adler, 1987, Angrosino, 2005), he took part in a variety of the Bureau's activities, from work duties to informal gatherings.

Typical of civil servants in China, the Bureau's employees tended to distrust outsiders. They feared that disclosing feelings and information to indiscreet strangers would endanger their careers. Through his previous employment, the researcher was on familiar terms with most employees that he interviewed, nevertheless, he used a number of techniques to reduce possible unease. With Tedlock (1991), the researcher observed his own participant role as that of a discreet but disinterested inside member, who had no conflicts of interests with participants (he made clear to participants that he had resigned his job at the Bureau), who had obtained managerial approval for the research (in interviews he presented a letter signed by a deputy-director), and who guaranteed anonymity for participants' identities. The researcher sensed that he had gained participants' confidence when, in some interviews, participants claimed that they had dwelled on taboo topics, such as their opinions of leaders¹.

To give a reflexive and faithful account of the Bureau's reality, the researcher adopted Pollner's (1991) method of self-questioning. He debated with himself and laid out possible ways of explaining what happened in the field. He then tested out these explanations in daily conversations with participants. This method was proved useful in suspending the researcher's own presumptions about the Bureau's reality which were hangovers from his previous service. Following Alvesson's (2003) advice, the researcher used a combination of qualitative methods to contextualize ethnographic observations within participants' and the

researcher's mutual efforts to construct the Bureau's reality. He used the following methods to collect data on the three moments of the Bureau's spatial production.

| Data | Methods |
|-----------------|---|
| Conceived space | <u>Observation</u> on the Bureau's spatial designs. The researcher also took photos to capture the building's spatial configurations (Buchanan, 2001). <u>Semi-structured interview</u> with space planners, that is, staff involved in architectural planning, internal decoration, room allocation and purchasing office furniture. <u>Documentary files</u> related to the building's planning (Peräkylä, 2005). |
| Lived space | <u>Unstructured interview</u> with space users. The researcher gave interviewees space to develop on topics that interested them (Holstein and Gubrium, 2002), acting most of the time as an empathetic listener (Mason, 2002). <u>Narratives</u> grounded in participants' life histories and subjective understandings of the Bureau's space (Gabriel, 2000). <u>Visual method</u> . The researcher asked some participants to take photos of the aspects of the building that they 'felt strongly about' (Warren, 2008). |
| Practiced space | <u>Ethnographic observation</u> on the ways that space users routinely engage with the Bureau's space. The researcher attended to employees' daily conversations (Atkinson and Delamont, 2005). He actively engaged employees in casual chats in order to grapple employees' explanations for their actions (Van Maanen, 2011). Thickly descriptive diaries (Geertz, 2005) were composed based on jotted notes. |

The field study yielded 8 semi-structured interviews with space planners (2 directors, 1 unit-chief and 3 clerks) and 57 unstructured interviews with space users (3 directors, 8 unit-chiefs, 34 clerks and 5 auxiliary personnel). These interviews ranged from 30 to 150 minutes in length. The study produced 143 diaries – most of which were written in English – and 28 sets of photos taken by participants.

The researcher manually transcribed all interviews in Chinese. Transcription and initial data analysis started shortly after the study started (Silverman, 2001). Interview transcripts and diaries were coded and recoded using computer software NVIVO (version 7.0). Initially data sets were classified into three groups based on the key analytical categories identified by Lefebvre (1991): spatial design, spatial practice and spatial experience. These data were coded within categories to produce themes particular to each category. For instance, in spatial designs the emerging codes are those of power relations (e.g. hierarchy, patriarchy) and of relevant ways of expressing power relations (e.g. aesthetic, symbolism). These themes were then coded between categories in order to produce, in the interrelations of spatial moments, processes of spatial production. For instance, the process of 'proliferation' emerged between three intra-category codes: 'symbolic encoding', 'symbolic decoding' and 'symbolic creation'. Photographic images, taken either by participants or the researcher, were treated as 'social artefacts' and 'decodable' source of information about those who make and consume them (Heisley and Levy, 1991: 259). Photos can be read as semiotic text capable of communicating authors' verbal intentions (Hancock, 2006), but it is important to notice that they also contain fleeting and unsayable moments of experience (Warren, 2008). To engage these moments, the researcher asked participants to read into the photos that they took to recall their experiences of photo-taking. Participants' narratives were coded and emerging themes were alluded to in subsequent interview to be further developed by the authors. In this article, three photos that captured employees' typical spatial experience are selected for presentation. The researcher went back to the field diary to reflect on his own experience when taking photos. Two photos are presented here to illustrate his reading of the Bureau's social space.

When presenting data, the researcher translated related interview transcripts into English. He consulted some participants to minimize the loss of semiotic nuances in translation. From field diaries and interviews, we constructed a number of ‘confessional stories’ (Van Maanen, 1988) based on evocative events and particularly telling experiences at the Bureau. We then winnowed down these stories to a manageable set of inter-category codes (‘proliferation’, ‘familiarization’ and ‘ritualization’) which we think exemplify the processes of the Bureau’s spatial production.

Findings

Proliferation of hierarchy

A ‘landmark in government office design’. This is how an archived document (hereinafter referred to as the *Design Note*) described the Bureau’s new building. Such a commendation was partly justified by the pleasant ways that symbols of hierarchy were blended into the building’s appearance. The entire infrastructure was situated on an artificial square about two metres above the pavement, creating a visible gap between the prestige of government and ‘lower’ civic lives. Rising 140 metres above the ground, the building was impressively vertical and dominated the skyline of neighbouring areas. The two main facets of the building sloped slightly inward as they rose up, giving the architecture an irregular trapezoid contour similar to that of an Aztec pyramid (photo 1). This design was described as ‘inviting a spirit of ongoing self-improvement’ (the *Design Note*). The building’s foundation, height and shape thus carried significations of hierarchy.

At the time of the research, the Bureau employed about 300 civil servants and 100 auxiliary workers. Civil servants were ranked in a scale of eight titles². For brevity they are known here as directors, unit-chiefs, and clerks. Auxiliary workers had no official ranks. This hierarchy was articulated by the building’s internal layout in a number of ways. Firstly, it was specified by the location of employees’ offices. Lower floors were occupied by auxiliary workers. Top floors (22, 23 and 24) – the ultimate destinations for ‘ongoing self-improvement’ – housed directors’ personal suites. An everyday saying at the Bureau described this as ‘leaders stand high and see further’. Unit-chiefs and clerks took up space in between, from floors 11 to 21. Here, core units were located above less important ones, and their occupants were referred to as ‘those close to leaders’ by their lower-floor colleagues. Secondly, employees’ workspace were furnished and decorated differently. A unit occupied two or three adjacently located and equally sized rooms that opened onto a common corridor through translucent glass doors. Unit-chiefs and clerks shared different rooms. In clerks’ offices, we find plastic cubicles with built-in desk panels; these rooms were crowded with up to eight cubicles. By comparison, unit-chiefs’ offices had high-quality furniture – wooden desks, sofas and leathered chairs – as well as more privacy. Directors’ suites were more private and richly furnished with heavy wooden doors, televisions, bookshelves, genuine art works, baths and bedrooms. Indeed, the executive floors were the only places in the building where corridors were decorated with red carpets, wood veneers and genuine art works. Finally, hierarchy was reflected in directors’ prioritized accesses to public facilities. Four passenger elevators serviced the entire building. According to employees of the facility maintenance unit, when not in use two elevators were programmed to wait at floor 24 to facilitate directors’ use, and one at the executive car-park in the basement. Interestingly, a ‘priority button’ was installed beneath the chief secretary’s desk – the secretary showed the button to the researcher but forbade him to take any photos – which enabled her to summon an empty elevator directly to executive floors. All in all, the building’s internal layout specified the Bureau’s hierarchy in minute details.

Interviews with the Bureau's management suggest that the symbolism of hierarchy was one of the primary considerations for choosing among designing alternatives. Zhang, the chief liaison for the building's construction project, recalled that the building initially had several designs, and the one that the American chief-architect was in favour of was 'something like a semi-circle opera house'. Zhang said that senior executives of the Bureau were insistent on the present design. 'I had a hard trying to convince him [the American] that a round design was not Chinese enough' (15 Nov. 2005). Implicitly, a 'Chinese' spatial design gives a strict mapping of hierarchy whenever possible. For the same reason, the least senior member of Bureau's executive team was allocated to an inferior suite. Deputy-director Qu, who oversaw office allocation and decoration, found this arrangement natural enough:

Initially we used poly propylene on internal walls [of executive suites]. We used one suite to test it out. It did not look nice, so we used wood for other suites. The original [test] room is still there (*Laugh*). You may look into director Zou's office to check it out for yourself³. (26 May, 2006)

Moving between pedestrian city streets and the elevated building, and between plastic cubicles and carpeted floors, employees were constantly reminded of their places within the Bureau's hierarchy – as they put it, in how 'close' they were to leaders. Not surprisingly, many of them developed an acute awareness of hierarchical symbols. During interviews, some pointed to hierarchical designs that a casual visitor might not notice. For instance, one interviewee noticed how right in the middle of the staircase between floor 21 and 22 there was a noticeable change in decoration materials (photo 2). While four lower steps were covered with ordinary cement, upper steps were upgraded to more expensive materials. 'Ridiculous! I don't think you'd believe this if you had not worked here' (Lu, clerk, 16 Nov. 2005). The executive floors started at floor 22; clearly, Lu interpreted the mixed decoration as an intentional design of hierarchy. Another employee who had been inside the chief-director's suite for facility maintenance commented:

She [the chief-director] has the largest bedroom, the most comfortable bathtub, the most expensive television... Other directors do not get these. Her bathtub is a massage tub; others only have showers. There are two air-ventilators in her office; there is only one for other directors⁴. (Shen, clerk, 30 November 2005)



Photo 1: the building



Photo 2: the staircase with mixed decorations

Interestingly, employees came to view the building as proliferated with hierarchical symbols

where it was apparently not designed to be so. As a form of daily pleasantries, employees sometimes congratulated each other as having leader-class office space. For instance, the researcher's unit, located on floor 16, was not a core unit. It happened that this unit was allocated to three rectangular rooms, one of which faced south-east (the chief-director's suite also faced south-east). By comparison, some core units on higher floors had less favourable shapes (e.g. oddly-shaped corners) or directions. One of the researcher's unit colleagues reflected complacently on her office:

When we first moved into the building some people started talking to me: 'see, yours is actually one of the powerful units.' I thought about it, and they might be right. What other units own rooms like ours? (*giggle*) (Wei, clerk, 22 March 2006)

To boost up self-esteem, Wei conjured up hierarchical power in places where both she and her interlocutors ought to know – her giggles suggest that she did know – to be non-existent, and deputy-director Qu confirmed that rooms on same floors were allocated randomly (interview, 26 May 2006). Similar examples were found in photos taken by employees. When asked to capture space that they 'felt strongly about', some employees highlighted exceedingly banal aspects of the building. They explained why they took these photos:



This is the ceiling of my office, and this is our life. You work, and when you rest and stretch your neck, you raise your head and this is the first thing you see. Everything here is fitted with a top! (Wu, clerk, 5 May 2006)



People are interested to know how our plants seem to grow well. I think this is because I get them high up there. With no space to grow even plants would be depressed. (Wang, clerk, 27 March 2006)



The other day I was watching pigeons as they flew by. There are no pigeons in this photo but I took another one [with pigeons] on my mobile. Looking at them, it makes you feel small and insignificant in this jungle of cement. (Xu, clerk, 7 March 2006)

What these employees felt strongly about was not space itself but hierarchical relations embodied within: the oppressions, the lack of personal (or botanical) development and the

sense of insignificance that low-rank clerks at the Bureau typically felt. Ceilings, walls and office views appear at the first glance utterly standardized and meaningless. They are images that can be found in nearly any contemporary office block around the world. However, these apparently meaningless spaces were understood by employees as expressions of bureaucratic hierarchy and their own places within it.

Familiarization of hierarchy

Employees did not just seek out significations of hierarchy in likely and unlikely places of the building. They also imbued these places with imaginative and highly descriptive narratives to the effect that hierarchical space became familiar and sensible aspects of their everyday lives.

The first narrative concerned directors' priority elevator button. Employees nicknamed this button as 'leaders' express' or simply, 'the button'. During morning rush hours, employees who waited at the main lobby sometimes witnessed elevators going by without stopping. On such occasions, expressions such as 'ah, here comes the express again!' were constantly heard. The 'express' was an in-joke among employees. While waiting for elevators one morning, the researcher asked an employee what 'leaders' express' meant. He was given a meaningful look, followed by the comment 'I see you have not done your homework' (field diary, 14 Oct. 2005). Similarly, when colleagues met in not-so-crowded (and thus leader-class) elevators, they would say something like 'lucky me, never thought I'd catch an express' (field diary, 17 April 2006). Narrating 'leaders' express' in sarcastic ways, employees showed disaffections to leaders' prioritized accesses to public facilities.

The second narrative concerned certain 'haunted' corridors in the building. These corridors were known to harm office occupants in secret ways. For instance, one haunted corridor on floor 15 was said to have caused an accident when employees of a nearby unit went out on a trip and their van overturned (field diary, 14 Feb. 2006). Another, on floor 14, was known to be responsible for an unfortunate employee who broke her leg at home, whose father-in-law passed away unexpectedly and whose daughter was diagnosed with leukemia (field diary, 4 April 2006). Among the victims of haunted corridors was the researcher's colleague-friend Liao. Liao's research (or so he said) on western medieval mythology revealed that his office, situated in an intersection of two corridors on floor 16, was likely haunted. Liao had an overseas master's degree but was not promoted for many years; he was sure this had much to do with his office location (field diary, 5 May 2006). Stories of haunted corridors were widely circulated and constantly updated at the Bureau. In general, these corridors were described as dark, distressing and filled with strange smells; also, they seemed to be limited to lower parts of the building. It is not hard to see that through these stories, employees sought supernatural accounts⁵ of how low official ranks caused professional and personal hardships.

The third narrative concerned the building's appearance. The building had a hollowed-out area in its main facade (photo 1). Documented materials and interviews affirmed that this design feature intended to allow sufficient sunlight for neighbouring residential blocks. However, an interpretation that the researcher was constantly hearing, from employees of different units and positions, was that the building resembled a certain Chinese character in its appearance (the character has a similar hollowed-out part) which happened to be the family name of the Bureau's ex chief-director. The story then went that either the ex-director personally saw to it before his retirement that his name was to be permanently inscribed in the Bureau's new high-rise, or, in another version, that the current chief-director was so indebted to her predecessor that she turned the whole building into a personal memorial.

The fourth narrative was similar. There was a water fountain outside the building's main entrance. Although the fountain was designed to 'enhance the aesthetical harmony of the building with surroundings' (the *Design Note*), it was interpreted differently. In the Chinese language, the character for 'water-flow' has the same pronunciation (but not the same written form) as that of the chief-director's family name. During a cigarette-break, Liao pointed out to the researcher the uncanny similarity between those two pronunciations. Liao said that people in his unit agreed after some discussions that the water-fountain was 'something like a personal mark' (Field diary, 7 April 2006). It seemed that the chief-director had designed her family, in an ingenious way, into another architectural aspect of the building.

In the last two narratives, employees conjured up the images of traditional family heads in China whose names were representative of household properties⁶. They implied that the chief-director (and her predecessor) commanded supreme and unchallengeable authorities at the Bureau. Perhaps it was for this reason that the Bureau's executives acquiesced to, if not welcomed, these narratives' wide circulation. The researcher tentatively mentioned to deputy-director Qu 'the Chinese character', only to find he was not at all annoyed:

So you have heard? (*laugh*) *That* character, right? Idol talks, stupid thing... You see some people like to make fun of such things. (26 May, 2006)

In sketches above, we see how employees fabricated narratives around the Bureau's space, from elevators, corridors to the building's appearance. Through these narratives, the building was experienced not only as totally hierarchical. Importantly, hierarchy was interpreted as personally meaningful, causally logical and genealogically coherent. Thus, hierarchical space was made a familiar aspect of the Bureau's everyday lives.

Ritualization of hierarchy

It is not surprising that the Bureau's employees, having made hierarchy a proliferated and familiar theme of their spatial environs, continued to act it out in everyday lives. On one occasion, when the chief-director had a meeting on floor 11, a deputy-chief went so far as to seal off the floor bathroom for the exclusive use of the director (field diary, 22 March 2006). This deputy-chief was described as an 'unbearable toady' by many, and some commented sarcastically she was promoted quickly for being a toady. The truthfulness of such accounts notwithstanding, one could generally observe that employees placed great emphasis on acting out respect for bureaucratic hierarchy.

At the Bureau, acts of respect took many forms. For instance, calling leaders by their full names was not appropriate, at least in public places. The following scene took place in an elevator (field diary, 6 Jan. 2006):

Employee A (*talking to his colleague*): Chief Zhao was on a business trip again.

Researcher (*interrupting*): What a busy man Zhao Qiang is.

Employee A (*looking around rather angrily*): Chief Zhao is a busy man!

Another form of respect involved treating certain spaces as leaders' reserved territories. For instance, high floors were acknowledged to be leaders' proper residence. In one interview, the researcher asked his unit-chief, who was also a colleague-friend, how he would allocate office space if he had the chance. The unit-chief apparently anticipated the researcher's intentions and said: 'So you want me to put our leaders in the basement? This is not possible.

You know it is not possible.' (Jiao, unit-chief, 2 June 2006) Leaders' parking lots, too, were reserved territories. Garage staff told the researcher that random parking happened all the time, but people always 'behaved themselves' when it came to directors' parking lots. 'Sometimes they [directors] might be away for weeks, and these spaces would be empty for weeks. I don't have to remind people.' (Xue, security guard, 10 April 2006) The same went with the way that cars were occupied. In the researcher's observation, the leader was always given a back-row seat when travelling with subordinates.

At the Bureau, a predominant form of respect was to maintain orders when employees walked, sat and arrived with leaders. In one interview, an employee with 17 years of service described how he gave a new recruit the latter's first lesson at the Bureau:

Suppose you are in front of an elevator and you meet a leader. You'd let him enter first. This is the way things ought to be. If you take the stairs, you must follow him, you cannot walk in front of him. (He, clerk, 20 April 2006)

Walking order was a big thing at the Bureau. The executive team sometimes went to lunch together. Usually directors were engaged in discussions and walking close to one another, yet however heated those discussions were, a careful observer would not fail to notice that the chief-director always led the walking. A studied easiness prevailed in the manners that deputies moved their bodies. Another half a step from one subordinator and the chief-director would lose her lead; that step never took place in the researcher's observations.

At the municipal government, the Bureau gained a reputation for its 'army of capable girls'. In the patriarchy culture of China, it was allegedly phenomenal that a female chief-director effectively subjugated male colleagues. The bureau's walking orders were strict not just when subordinates learnt to follow a common leader, for hierarchical linearity mandated that everyone must position him/herself in relation to everyone else when walking. One typical occasion was the grand assembly when all employees attended. Customarily, thirteen members of the executive team would walk to the panel in a strict single file after other employees were seated. Officially, the executive team consisted of only two ranks, but knowledge such as directors' seniority, the number of core units under command, and most importantly, their likelihood of moving up the career ladder were referenced to decide the walking order, to the effect that everyone of the team always knew their exact position within the single-file walk. This ceremonious walking, exposed to the gaze of a large audience, was executed with great precision, for it defined a hierarchy that only inside members of the Bureau would appreciate. Thus, for employees of the researchers' unit, any slight change in the walking order excited days of gossips in the office. Which leader was going up, and which was going down?

Walking orders were so common at the Bureau that when no hierarchical difference applied within a group, employees created them in their games of 'playing the leader'. One such game involved the researcher and his colleague-friend Liao. When the two met before toilets, Liao would stop, pat the researcher on the shoulder, and say: 'Come on, come on, leader, you first.' (Field diary, 25 Oct. 2005) This game became a standard joke between the two despite that both were sectional-clerks. Elevator entrances and toilet doors were convenient spots where one of them would suddenly step back and push the other into 'leadership'.

Seating orders were equally important. The following paragraph is quoted from a field diary (16 Jan 2006). It describes an occasion when deputy-director Meng and eight members of the

researchers' unit had a festival banquet at a holiday resort.

The director was late. After the table was set there was plenty of time to decide on the seating order. The director, apparently, would occupy the host seat, and Jiao the unit-chief would sit at his left-hand side⁷, but who would sit on the right? Someone suggested Ye, for although Ye was a sectional-clerk he seemed to be favoured by the director. Of course Ye protested violently. Heated but jovial discussions on the right-hand seat went on for the next fifteen minutes. And then it suddenly occurred to us that we might be mistaken about the location of the host seat. This thought caused havoc among us. We called in a head-waiter, and the head-waiter consulted his manager to confirm. Finally, all was settled. The most senior clerk took up the seat on the director's right side, and then the second most senior clerk placed her handbag on the seat directly opposite to the director's. From there things were easy. We each evaluated our positions in the unit and followed the order.

Finally, the order of arrival counted. The researcher and his unit colleagues sometimes gave official welcomes to visiting delegations from abroad. One essential skill involved in this job was not to anticipate the arrival of the plane, but to anticipate the arrival of those in senior positions. For instance, the plane was due at 14:00. As a gesture of courtesy it was decided that a deputy director met guests in person. This director was scheduled to arrive at 13:40, considering that the plane might be early. Now the unit-chief, who naturally must accompany his superior on the occasion, must arrive no later than 13:20, considering that the director might arrive early. This calculation went on. Consequently, as the lowest ranking official of the group the researcher decided to arrive at 12:40. It mattered little when the plane was due. What mattered was that employees of lower ranks must arrive before their leaders.

In these daily episodes, we witness how hierarchy was established through everyday practices such as addressing leaders' title and treating certain spaces as leaders' reserved territories. Particularly, orders in walking, seating and arriving were strictly observed to give leaders proper respects on social occasions. These activities took ritualized forms because they followed minute and socially normalized scripts, and because they were often meant to be seen by an audience outside the parties directly involved in actions. Hierarchy was ritualized in the everyday practices of the Bureau's space.

Discussion

Above, we trace the everyday production of the Bureau's space and outline three interrelated processes. Employees proliferated the symbolism of hierarchy to non-hierarchical aspects of the building's design. They familiarized themselves with hierarchical space by fabricating and circulating meaningful narratives about them. They also practiced the building's space in ritualized forms so that bureaucratic authority was properly respected in everyday lives. Below, we abstract from the case to identify some more general everyday processes that reproduced (rather than undermine) dominant power relations in an organization.

Proliferation: homogenizing hierarchical space

The Bureau's new building was highly symbolic. Its contour and colour patterns represented rational thinking (Witkin, 1990); its outlook was a phallic symbol of male domination that abounds in today's corporate landscape (Douglas, 2004). But the dominant symbolism was bureaucratic hierarchy. As employees moved up in the career ladder they were entitled to higher, larger, more private and richly decorated space. Some facilities, such as the massage

tub, were symbolic more than they were functional. The Bureau was typical of many others around the world where hierarchy is loudly expressed by spatial symbols (Baldry, 1999; Elsbach and Pratt, 2007; Rosen et al., 1990; Van Marrewijk, 2009).

When negotiating this space, employees typically drew on the dominant symbolism of hierarchy encoded in the space. Recall that one employee mused that ‘everything here is fitted with a top’ when explaining photographs they have taken. Their sense of restrained progress was interpreted through the signs and symbols of hierarchy. This created a relatively homogeneous form of spatial interpretation whereby employees came to see hierarchy everywhere – from the stairwells to fountains to their own office ceiling. This effectively reinforced hierarchy in the way employees interpreted, felt about, and experienced the Bureau. It also had the effect of reinforcing one relative homogenous hierarchical space across the organization.

Familiarization: negotiating hierarchical space

Like many standardized offices around the world, the Bureau’s new building was designed to embody instrumental rationality (Martin, 2003). It exemplified a ‘non-place’ devoid of personal relations, histories or identities (Augé, 1995). Sociologists and geographers believe that a primary imperative for space dwellers is to turn geometrically abstract space into meaningful places so that such space becomes inhabitable (Bachelard, 1958; Tuan, 1977). In line with this observation, we find that employees invested the Bureau’s space with a series of narratives rich in rhetoric and imagination. Through these narratives, what might otherwise be experiences as an abstract and potentially alienating non-place (Augé, 1995) came to be animated with personal meanings, histories and a sense of genealogy.

We found that employees’ spatial narratives typically sought to account for directors’ hierarchical power in comparison with clerks’ lack of it. Such narratives were ‘homework’, as one of them put it, necessary for navigating the bureaucratic everyday. These narratives were humorous; they offered employees a temporary ‘escape route’ from the ‘paramount reality’ of bureaucratic hierarchy (Cohen and Taylor, 1992). While the building was designed to establish hierarchy as a formal aspect of everyday lives, employees’ spatial narratives rendered hierarchy ridiculous. In these narratives, hierarchical power did not seem to stem from the formal legal system of bureaucracy (Weber, 1947), instead, it hinged precariously on natural blood bonds (e.g. leaders as family heads) and even the work of supernatural forces (e.g. the haunted corridor). The spatial narratives were typically ironic insofar as they showed by the apparently arbitrary nature of bureaucratic space. Looming behind employees’ narrative appropriation of space, then, was a cynical self that remained dis-identified with the ideology of hierarchy (Fleming and Spicer, 2003). It was a self that quickly identified a way of appropriating the dominating space of hierarchy, that chose to hide safely behind inaction, and that explained away such inaction as an understandable surviving strategy in the eyes of a compassionate peer. So while these spatial stories created some distance, they ultimately reinforced the hierarchical relations that permute the Bureau.

Ritualization: mobilizing hierarchical space

At the Bureau, everyday practices of space took ritualized forms. Rituals connected actions with meanings (Beyer and Trice, 1988; Goffman, 1961); by exposing actions to a keenly observing audience, they also placed employees under pressure to act out hierarchy in normative and consistent ways, for inconsistent acts were likely to be interpreted by the

audience as evidence of insincere intentions on the part of actors (Goffman, 1990). In short, rituals highlighted public performances of hierarchy as definitive of obeying hierarchy. Thus, some employees publically humiliated their colleagues, for instance by insisting on correct ways of addressing leaders, so that their own performances came to be seen as creditable.

Often, employees demonstrated playfulness while performing hierarchy. For instance, people at the banquet table actually knew their proper seats once the host seat was confirmed, yet they went on to negotiate seating as if they didn't. Similarly, in the 'leader-you-first' game, the researcher and his colleague-friend staged the sacred leadership (Grint, 2010) in an apparently profane space. These games were more than common courtesies, for they revealed a self that was fully aware of, and playing among, action alternatives. Employees acted out hierarchy not because they desired it as such; they had voluntarily given up other options only for the sake of putting on good performances. Indeed, the unit-chief who sealed off the floor bathroom exposed herself to public shame because she showed such sincerity in desiring hierarchy. The cynical self that circulated spatial narratives also loomed large in everyday spatial practices. Through these cynically knowing games, employees effectively reproduced the hierarchical relations they often sought to mock. This had the effect of reinforcing the hierarchical relations that were mocked.

Conclusion

This study draws from a ten-month ethnographic study to investigate the production of social space in a Chinese government office (the 'Bureau'). We find that the Bureau's hierarchical space was produced through three intertwined processes: proliferation, familiarization and ritualization. Through proliferation employees homogenized their spatial experiences and came to see hierarchy everywhere. Through familiarization employees circulated ironic narratives about hierarchical space, which make their workspace inhabitable but reinforced hierarchical motifs. Through ritualization employees mobilized hierarchy, often for the sake of staging obedience to hierarchy before peers, in minute practices so that hierarchical space permeated their entire lifeworld at work. These processes allow us to appreciate that what came to dominate in the Bureau's everyday lives was a social space of hierarchy far beyond the building itself, but one that employees had resisted and constructed at the same time.

With these findings we contribute to existing studies of organizational space in a number of ways. First, we extend existing studies of how relations of power and domination are encoded into organizational space (eg. Dale and Burrell, 2008). We do this through a detailed study of various everyday ways through which hierarchical relations are encoded into the space of a government bureaucracy. By doing this, we provide significant additional empirical detail to the literature tracing out the relationship between power relations and organizational space. Second, we call into question recent micro-approaches to organizational space. Most existing work investigating how social space is being produced in everyday organizational lives tends to highlight this as a space for resistant or alternative understandings and practices of space (eg. Beyes and Steyaert, 2012; Wapshott and Marlett, 2012). In contrast, we found that everyday practices of recreating organizational space were actually be a fulcrum for reinforcing and reproducing spatialized power relations. Even when employees joked about spatialized power relations they found ridiculous, they nonetheless reproduced these hierarchical relations as the obvious horizon that all organizational members had to operate. This reminds us that everyday practices, narratives and uses of space can actually reinforce spatialized power relations rather than undermine them. Finally, this study provides some rare insights on the bureaucratic everyday in China. Although images of Chinese bureaucracy

occasional pop up in films and novels, few accounts are available on the everyday lives of Chinese bureaucracy. In this study we have ventured inside a Chinese bureaucracy. What we found was a bureaucratic life sustained by employees' dutiful reproduction of space that they dwelled day-in and day-out.

Our study has a number of limitations. First, we focus on the production of a particular type of social space (i.e. hierarchical space). However, there exist many other modes of organizing. For instance, Tyler and Cohen's (2010) work opens up the question of how gendered relations at work are spatially constructed. Furthermore, there is little work exploring how non-bureaucratic organizations such as sole-traders, street marketers and other small operators constitute their organization through using space (cf. Munro and Jordan, 2013). Second, our study is based in the particular cultural context of China. This means many of our findings may only hold in this particular context. Indeed, the focus on micro-level conformity to hierarchical social relations might be seen as the result of a highly collectivist culture concerned with social hierarchy (Hofstede, 1981). While we think that the cultural context is certainly important, studies in more individualist contexts that are less focused on hierarchy have also noted that individuals tend to conform to many of the hierarchical relations that are designed into space (eg. Wasserman and Frankel, 2011). However, it remains to be seen whether the processes that we have identified hold in other cultural contexts. Finally, we have focused on how hierarchical relations of domination are reproduced through the everyday spatialized actions in an organization. But focusing on hierarchical relations, we may have missed other relations of domination that organizational space may reproduce such as patterns of gendered domination (Cohen and Taylor, 2010). We think this omission might be addressed in future research that would explore the relationship by the practices of reproducing space and other broader forms of social domination such as gender, race, class and sexuality.

Endnotes

¹ 'Leader', 'ling(3)dao(3)' in Chinese mandarin, was used synonymously as 'manager' in Chinese bureaucracy. In this article, we employ the term purely as a member category, and not as what ethno-methodologists call an 'analyst's category'. This means by this term we do not indicate any of the characteristics usually associated with leaders in the vast academic literature on leadership. In a sense, we are following Kelly's (2008) call to examine how participants actually use the notion of 'leadership' in particular local settings.

² The eight titles, standardized by *the Chinese Law of Civil Service*, are: director, deputy-director, unit-chief, deputy-chief, unit-clerk, section-clerk, senior-clerk and junior-clerk.

³ The Bureau's executive team consisted of three directors and ten deputy directors. Officially, the chief-director was on par with two other directors, but because she was in charge of most important units of the Bureau, she was in fact the top decision-maker. Similarly, director Zou was the least senior deputy-director because he was in charge of logistic units and because he was soon to retire.

⁴ Admittedly, few employees got to look inside directors' bathrooms, but during daily conversations, the researcher found out that most employees knew exactly what facilities

directors got. It must also be added that baths and bedrooms were partly functional, for it was common that the Bureau's employees worked overtime. However, since clerks and unit-chiefs were not entitled to similar treatments when they worked overtime, we think it is more appropriate to present these facilities as symbols of hierarchy.

⁵ Popular Chinese geomancy, or Feng-shui, explain fortunes and misfortunes as the direct consequences of the supernatural forces that buildings and internal layouts are said to be imbued with (Creightmore, 2012).

⁶ In China, the surnames of family heads are used to name family properties. For instance, Zhang's family house is called 'Zhang Fu' – 'Fu' literally means 'luxurious abodes'. Also, the traditional Chinese society is a patriarchy in which family heads have supreme power over family members (Balazs, 1964).

⁷ The left-hand seat of the host is the second most senior seat at a Chinese table, followed by the right-hand seat, and then the seat directly opposite to that of the host's.

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